A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA
WESTVIEW

Volume 18
Issue 1 *Fall/Winter*

Article 4

11-15-1998

Crazy Quilt

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by Lee Anne Fennell

They buried them in the morning and Tag stood by and watched, and when it was over, he started for the panhandle like he had promised, taking the northwest road out of the city until it turned without warning into a narrow, loping county two-lane. He was in for plenty, he thought, and would have turned back if he hadn't still been half-drunk from the day before, and so dazed and exhausted that the thought of changing course made his gums throb. During the smooth patches he gulped coffee, taking it like medicine, scalding his throat. *The main thing*...he said to himself as he swallowed, and then realized he'd forgotten the rest. *The main thing*, he said to himself again, but it was no use. He kept on driving.

The landscape was appallingly flat and unchanging, and it seemed he was making no progress at all. In every direction, as far as he could see, fields of tall, dead-looking grass were bent to the everlasting wind. Dead grass and red dust. They made him tired. The rental car didn't have a tape deck, and the radio was all static and gospel. He talked to himself out loud and pounded his hands against the steering wheel to keep from dozing off. After a while, he had to shut up because the things he was saying sounded crazy. He hadn't slept at all the past two nights. It was absurd for him to be here, on this road. But the old woman had insisted.

"I'm too old to take no for an answer," she'd said on the telephone, like that settled the matter. She spoke as if they were well acquainted, as if she had something to do with Tag's life. But she was only Jamie's grandmother, whom Tag had never met. Just the crazy old grandmother of the woman who used to be his wife. Jamie had called her BaBa.

Dead grass and red dust. He started speaking out loud again. *Red dust and dead grass. Dead rust and dread gas. Dread gust and red ass.* Anything to make himself smirk, to make the miles pass.

But he returned to it again and again like a damaged tooth. The accident was pure bad luck. Someone in an El Camino had a seizure, crossed a median, hit a Honda Civic head on in plain daylight on a Saturday afternoon. Both cars were totalled, and everyone inside was killed. In the Civic was his wife and her mother, on their way to the shopping mall. His estranged wife, fled to her hometown to escape him; and his estranged mother-in-law, who was taking his estranged wife shopping as a kind of therapy to help her get over him, Tag, the estranged husband. Jamie had just turned twenty-four, and he'd missed her birthday. Death sealed it, he figured. He was estranged for good now. He would never even get an upgrade to ordinary widower.

The road was taking him nowhere, though the speedometer stood above sixty. He paced himself against the odometer for a few miles to see whether the speedometer might be broken, but it wasn't. He opened the window, hoping the wind would wake him up, give him a sense of motion, but it was cold and gusty and full of stinging dust and he had to pull over to rub his eyes.

He'd tried to reason with the crazy old woman. He told her that he'd only been Jamie's husband for a short while, not even two years, and that they had been separated when Jamie died.

"But not divorced?"

"No. Not divorced. Not legally."

"Then you were man and wife till death did you part. Just like God hath ordained."

Tag had never considered that God had anything to do with any of it, but he kept quiet. Instead he said, "I have to get back to Philadelphia. Much as I'd love to meet you, BaBa." The name sounded ridiculous, but she had insisted he call her

that. It made him feel disoriented, like a babbling infant. Maybe that was the point. "The thing is," he said, "it just isn't possible."

"Possible?" laughed the old woman. "Only God knows what's possible and what's impossible. You put your car on the road and drive, and then we'll see whether it's possible. If it's impossible, you'll find that out, too, I expect."

He'd given in at last, probably more from sleep deprivation than anything else. There was no question he was in a unique state. Still, there was something appealing in her words. "Put your car on the road and drive." It was something to do, something he was capable of. So here he was, driving. Only he hadn't expected it to be so bleak, so empty. He hadn't expected it to take so much out of him.

He tried to remember everything Jamie had told him about BaBa. There wasn't much. She lived in the middle of nowhere, on a farm identical to the ones spooling endlessly past him now. A dirt farm, Jamie'd said. "That's the crop? Dirt?" he asked, even though he knew she was trying to be serious, trying to say something serious about her family. She didn't answer him, just went on with more pitiful Dustbowl-era facts. BaBa never learned to drive. She never finished high school. She liked making quilts.

It was a "crazy quilt," of all things, that Tag was summoned to retrieve. BaBa's masterpiece. She'd made it for Jamie, and now she wanted Tag to have it.

There was no sun, and the hard white sky hurt his eyes. There was so much of it, surrounding him on all sides, and there was nothing in it, no clouds, no birds, no blue, just blank, impassive white. Patterns started to swim before his eyes. The human eye was not set up for this kind of thing. There was no place to look.

Outside Fort Supply, the signs started: Hitchhikers May Be Escaping Mental Patients. Tag remembered Jamie telling him about her family's dark references about people "sent to Supply." He craned his neck to look at the buildings as he passed. He could not see anything particularly crazy about them. He told himself he would pick up any hitchhikers he saw, no matter how insane they looked. He could use the company.

At the funeral, no one had spoken to him, although plenty whispered and some even glared—hard, open, offended glares like they just couldn't believe he had the nerve to go on living. It was what he expected. He was someone to blame, in the flesh, a useful thing to have at a funeral.

At Slapout, Tag stopped for gas and coffee. Jamie'd told him the story of this town, too, told it right in the middle of an all-night convenience store near campus one giddy night when they'd first started dating. The store was out of something or other, some kind of beer, maybe, or his brand of cigarettes, and it reminded her of Slapout, where long ago someone had asked for bologna at the gas station, the town's only going concern, only to have the station attendant say, "Sorry, sir, we're slap out." Jamie told the story very dramatically, first putting her hands on her hips, pretending to be the ravenous bologna-seeker, then dropping her voice into a soft drawl, like Deputy Dawg, for the polite, apologetic station attendant.

The pink-faced man in the station, probably a direct descendent of the one who'd spoken the

Photograph by Steve Lounsbury

immortal words, laughed out loud when Tag tried to pay before pumping. "You aren't from around these parts, are you?"

"No." With an outsider's forced amiability. But he felt a sudden pure hatred for this alien, drawling, godforsaken wasteland. It had nothing to do with him. He went back out and stood in the wind and filled the tank. The wind made it cold, colder than it really was, and his suit jacket wasn't enough and his tie whipped backwards and twisted in the wind. The very fact he was out here was a sign his judgment was broken for good, that this had done him in. He darkly considered how far it was back to Fort Supply.

At last he was underway again. More coffee, scalding hot. It burned his tongue and his throat, and it splashed out of its styrofoam cup and burned his hand and soaked into his dark pants and burned there, too. He watched the horizon, where he could see an actual vanishing point that, over time, yielded up steel windmills and grain elevators and barbed wire fencing and sometimes a clapboard house, abandoned, and sometimes cows, which made him feel better, for some reason.

BaBa had had two children, Tag remembered. Two sons. The older son died as a child from blood poisoning when he cut his own hand with a knife. "I was only testing the blade," the boy cried over and over, thinking he would be punished. He kept on saying it until fever flushed his brain and he stopped making sense. Jamie used to tell this story all the time, even though it drove Tag crazy. She'd had to listen to it from her father her whole life growing up, and she thought she was entitled to tell it as often as she'd been forced to hear it. He'd been on her mind an inordinate amount, Tag thought, this phantom little boy, the uncle-to-be she had never met.

BaBa's younger son was Jamie's father, who had died the summer before last. A massive heart attack, out of the blue, while he was mowing the backyard. Jamie's mother found him on his knees with his head thrown back, the lawnmower churning on. Jamie was out working in the garden when the call came in that Sunday afternoon. Tag hung up the phone and watched her through the window for a while, working the dirt, oblivious, and then he went outside and said her name.

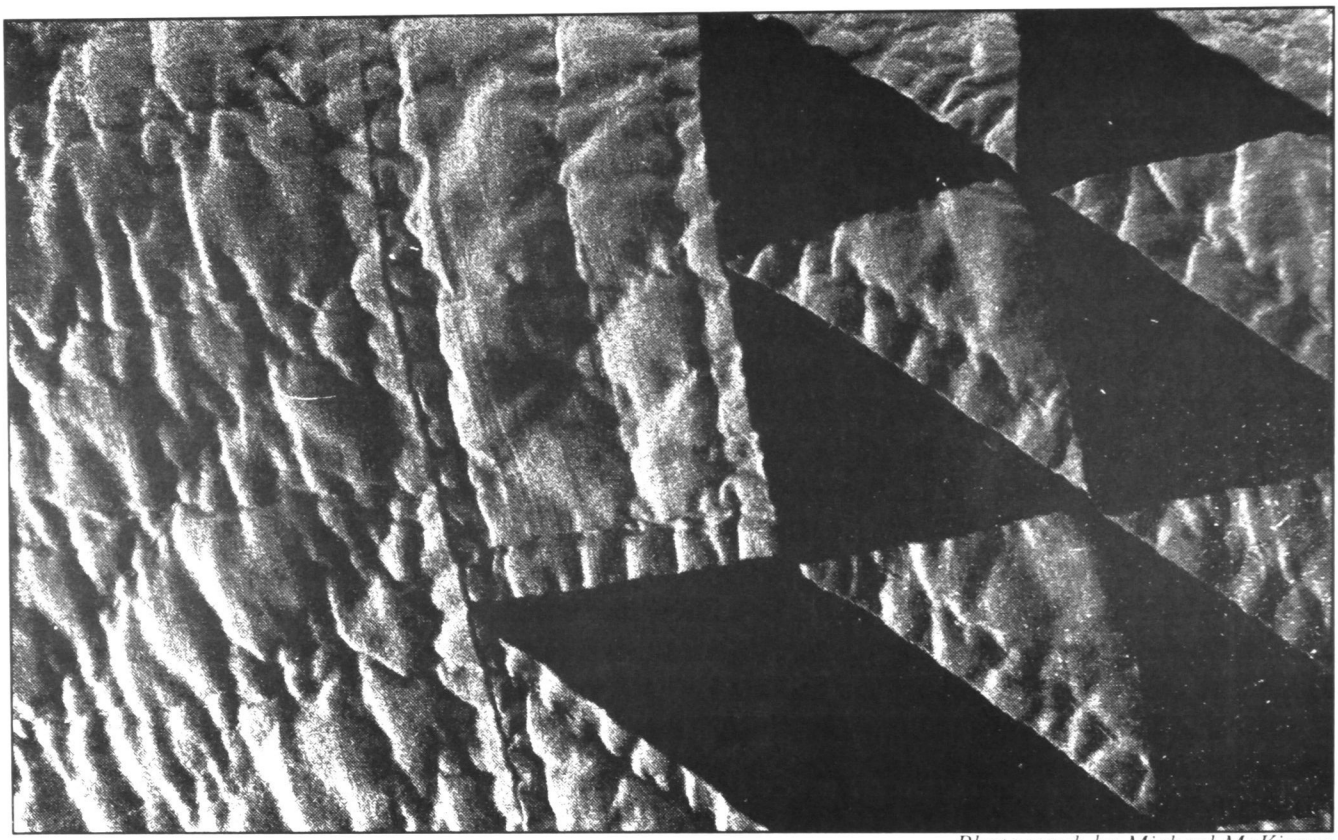
He gulped at the coffee, already lukewarm, tried to think about something else, tried to focus on the road, the fields, the blank sky. It wasn't any use.

Finally he reached the place where BaBa had told him to turn, and he left the main road for a narrow gravel track which thinned over time into plain dirt. A windmill appeared, and then a farmhouse beside it, a green roof against the blank sky.

An old dog trotted up to the car when he turned in the drive and followed alongside, its tail thwacking against the side of the car. Tag was afraid the dog would get caught up underneath the car somehow, so he slowed and then stopped, a hundred feet from the house. He sat still, his ears ringing. The dog ambled off, tail aloft. It would look odd, furtive to leave the car this far out, Tag thought. He started the engine again and drove up to the house.

The place was so quiet and lifeless that Tag worried for a moment that the old woman might have died. Her health was failing, and she had been too frail to come to the city for the funeral. He rang the bell and waited, knocking dust off the bottoms of his shoes. He waited a long time, and then he tried the door. It was unlocked. He went in tentatively, calling out "BaBa, BaBa, it's me, Taggart." The house was dim inside and once his eyes adjusted, he saw that she was there, huddled in the corner of the sofa, her hands busy on a quilt. It looked like an exploding star, full of brilliant color. She was so much smaller than she had sounded on the phone. He couldn't get over it. She was lost in the cushions.

After a second, she looked up at him and frowned and twisted at her hearing aid. Her face had every possible crease and the frowning cut them deeper, made the corners of her mouth dis-



Photograph by Michael McKinney

appear altogether. Her eyes were strange, pale, almost white. "You took your time about it," she said, and pulled at the couch arm, trying to stand. "But I knew you'd make it yet, God willing." She rocked forward, sank back. Tag moved forward to help her up, started to reach out for her hands, but the skin on them was transparent, paper thin, and he was afraid he would hurt her. He didn't see how she could manage a sewing needle with those hands, or even a knife and fork.

BaBa grabbed at one of his arms with both hands and squeezed, hard, and pulled herself up, and he had to step back to keep his balance. She did not let go even then, just held onto him and looked him over, frowning, appraising.

"You may as well get what you came for," she said at last. She led him with dragging steps to a room in the back of the house that smelled of mothballs and cedar. On the bed was Jamie's crazy quilt.

Tag had never seen anything like it. A chaos of colors, rich and deep and liquid: saturated blues and turquoises and purples and golds and reds and greens, concentrated, intense colors set off expertly against one another. He ran his fingers over the thick fabrics — corduroys and velvets and heavy flannels. There were thousands of separate pieces, and they were all irregular and perfect, intricately stitched together. It was hypnotic, compelling. It seemed impossible that such a thing could exist in the middle of a landscape so barren, so empty, so blank. Tag found that he wanted it very much, even though until that very moment he had never thought about quilts at all, one way or the other.

"It's beautiful," he said at last.

"It's yours," said BaBa.

"I can't take it. There's too much work in it."

"You don't have a choice."

Tag laughed, but the old woman's face didn't soften. She wasn't joking.

"You think I'm a peaceful old woman, but I'm

not at peace." Her eyes were almost as pale as the sky, and harder to look at. Tag stood there dumbly, staring at the quilt.

It's just, I'm not family," he said at last.

"You think I don't know?" said BaBa. "I know you aren't my family. You're no kin to me and I don't know you from Adam. I didn't make this quilt out of any love for you, make no mistake, mister."

"I'm sorry," he said. And he was. Sorry for her, sorry for Jamie, sorry for Jamie's mother, and her father, and the uncle she never knew and the children she never had. And sorry for himself, too, for everyone he'd lost. "It's been a strange week," he said at last. "Maybe I shouldn't have come out here."

"The earth is going to close over this family." She stared past Tag. "I'm all that's left, and the earth is going to close over me, and the house will be torn down, and there will be nobody left to remember that such people as us walked on this earth."

"It's the same for everyone," Tag said. "For you and me alike and everybody else everywhere." He hoped she would snap out of this apocalyptic mode before things got any worse, before she broke down, or broke something in herself that he was ill-suited to fix.

"I had a beautiful granddaughter named Jamie that I loved. I made this quilt for her, and it is nothing, just old rags and thread, but it has love in it, and remembering. There was such a one here as Jamie, and she was lovely, and I loved her." She was speaking softly now, almost to herself.

Tag wanted to promise that Jamie would never be forgotten, or BaBa either, but he could see already how things might go. He saw his own great granddaughter, descended from a woman he hadn't even met yet and couldn't imagine meeting, grown up and in charge of dissolving an estate, pulling the crazy quilt out of mothballs in a dusty attic or dank cellar when an old house had to be sold, touching the fabrics, surprised at the intricacy of the workmanship. If she was a particularly thoughtful soul, which he hoped she would be despite his genetic input, she might ask those still among the living where it had come from, and whose it had been. Would anyone be able to remember the answer? Tag didn't know. All he could do was fold the quilt as carefully as he knew how.

BaBa seemed to have worn herself out. She swayed and reached out for Tag, and he helped her back to the couch and she sank into the cushions.

"You have a long haul back, I expect."

"Yes, ma'am. I should get going." The quilt was in his arms and he wondered what else he should say. He glanced around the room. There were photographs everywhere, all over the walls and standing in frames on every surface the sideboard, the television set, the coffee table. Tag was in some of them. A wedding picture, an unflattering one, his mouth open for cake like a snake with unhinged jaws going for a goose egg. Jamie, beautiful, feeding him. A picture from their honeymoon, his hair wet from swimming, making a face for the camera, for the face behind the camera, Jamie's. There were cards, too, and piles of letters, and he recognized Jamie's peach stationery, her careless printing.

BaBa had gathered the quilt-in-progress into her lap and was examining the edges, her hands moving steady and sure over needlework that would outlast her, that would outlast Tag, too. He watched for a moment, waiting to see if she would say anything else, half hoping she would keep talking, that the two of them could keep talking. But she was absorbed in her work, and there wasn't anything else to say anyway. He stood there, awkward, for a few seconds more, and then he turned and went out into the cold wind, into the blank afternoon, the quilt bright and heavy in his arms.

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